

# **Rural Counties Task Force Annual Report December 2003**

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In 1988 the Rural Counties Task Force was formed as a joint effort between the California Transportation Commission and the 28 rural Regional Transportation Planning Agencies (RTPAs) and Local Transportation Commissions (LTCs). After the 2000 census, two counties left the Task Force when population growth qualified them as Metropolitan Planning Organizations. The Task Force provides a forum for California's smallest counties to stay informed, have a voice, and contribute toward shaping statewide transportation policies and programs.

The Task Force is an informal organization with no budget or staff. Meetings are held on the third Friday of odd numbered months in Sacramento. Kathie Jacobs of the CTC staff acts as liaison to the Task Force, and CTC and Caltrans staff typically attend the meetings to present information or enter discussions regarding issues that interest and affect rural counties.

Enactment of SB 45 in 1997 was a watermark year for rural RTPAs in California. SB 45 placed new responsibilities on the rural agencies while providing only minimal funding for the staff needed to carry out these new mandates. The effects were especially pronounced in the smallest agencies, where very modest staffs became responsible for project-specific programming, planning and delivery activities formerly relegated entirely to Caltrans. These changes gave new focus and intensity to the value of the Task Force.

Certainly the past year has presented challenges to the transportation community heretofore undreamed of. The rural counties continue to work cooperatively with their urban counterparts, the CTC and Caltrans staff to meet those challenges, while looking ahead to a time when brighter funding and policy opportunities can materialize.

## **ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

### **Local Road Rehabilitation and Maintenance Funding**

The State's smallest counties (by population) generally have proportionately higher miles of roadways with the fewest resources to maintain them. The CTC recognized this need when, in 1998, the Commission opened the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) to local road rehabilitation projects. Many were funded, including those in rural areas, even though rehabilitation projects do not fit well into the STIP funding process. The Task Force acknowledges and appreciates the Commission's efforts to widen the

description of rehab projects and work with rural counties to make these projects fit better into the STIP.

The passage of Proposition 42 suggested a new source of funding was coming to rural counties for local road rehab. Unfortunately, suspension of Proposition 42 this year, and most likely next fiscal year by the legislature indicates that rural agencies will continue to struggle to maintain their existing road networks. Even with full restoration of Proposition 42 funds to local agencies, closing the gap of deferred maintenance would not be attained in the foreseeable future.

### **Efforts**

In 2003 the rural counties lost another source of funding available to maintain their local road systems – the TEA Exchange program. Many rural counties took advantage of a CTC policy, which allowed the rural RTPA to opt out of implementing a Transportation Enhancement Activities program, and exchange TEA funds for state-only dollars, which have the flexibility to be used on local roads projects, whereas TEA funds generally do not. When the Commission adopted a new policy to administer the TEA program under the STIP, this unintended consequence represented another loss of funding (however meager) for local road maintenance and rehabilitation in many rural counties.

### **Continuing Issues**

- As rural counties continue to work in partnership with CTC and Caltrans staff when new policies are being formulated, every effort should be made to avoid further erosion of funding that remains in statewide programs to support local road rehab and maintenance.
- Until a sufficient, dedicated funding source is found and the backlog is eliminated, small rural counties continue to need the option of using STIP funds for road rehabilitation.

### **Unstable Funding Programs**

The uneven flow funding through statewide programs is inherently at odds with the time it takes to plan, design and build most transportation projects. Most of the smaller counties do not have the locally generated sales tax and other revenues available to urban regions. Having access to local funds provides flexibility to keep projects moving or start new projects, an option available to few rural counties regardless of the state of the economy.

Potential loss of Programming, Planning and Monitoring funds (PP&M) in fiscal year 2003 heightened the challenge for rural counties to maintain the delivery system in place for projects already funded.

### **Efforts**

At least half the Task Force member counties have expressed interest in or pursued the approach taken by many urban areas: a local sales tax for transportation. While many rural counties could meet a 50% majority threshold, few – if any – could meet the currently required 2/3 majority. Other counties have or are in the process of enacting road impact mitigation fee programs, to generate revenues for road improvements demanded by new development.

### **Continuing Issues**

- Rural counties continue to work with our urban counterparts to ease the voting threshold to enact a local sales tax for transportation purposes, to enable us to develop additional funding for needed projects.

## **Project Delivery**

As the State grapples with the budget deficit and staff levels are frozen or cut at Caltrans, the role of RTPAs as active participants in project development and delivery has grown in importance. As key players in the project delivery process, local agencies develop the skills and knowledge base to advocate for their STIP projects. Many rural counties are increasing their roles and responsibilities in the project delivery, either with newly trained staff, or experienced project managers hired on contract. As the urban regions know, local participation increases the odds for a successful project delivered on schedule and within budget.

### **Efforts**

- The rural counties build on their accomplishments, sharing experience with each other both informally, and through intensive workshops conducted at the annual fall conference.
- Multi-county pooling of STIP funds, projects and consultant resources to manage projects effectively.
- Many rural counties are working intensively with staff in their local Caltrans district to improve project delivery performance and make the best use of shrinking resources.

### **Continuing Issues**

- The complexity and long completion time to gain environmental clearance on a project needs simplification and a more rational process.
- Continuous flow of PP&M funds to support project delivery activities at the local level is critical for continued success in rural areas.

## **Information Sharing / Staff Development**

The complexities of transportation planning and project delivery challenge urban and rural regions alike. The staff at rural agencies however, must often struggle to keep up

with the ever-changing rules and regulations even while advocating for their own local projects. A primary purpose of the Rural Counties Task Force is to provide a venue for sharing information and advocating for shared concerns. Feedback from members indicates the Task Force is improving in this arena, although much work remains.

#### **Efforts -**

- In conjunction with the California Association for Coordinated Transportation (CalACT) the Task Force held their second annual conference in October 2003. The event provided many focused sessions led by experience professionals on a wide array of topics of interest to rural counties and was well attended.
- Members developed tools to assist staff development and simplify project delivery. These include:
  - *An RTPA Manual for Rural Counties* – a compendium of materials essential to running a rural transportation planning agency
  - *A Local Agency Manual for Processing Projects* – a user friendly, streamlined version of the two-volume Local Assistance Manual, tailored to assist in completing smaller projects common in rural areas.

### **Transportation Development Act**

Task Force members responded quickly when a proposal to make some significant changes to the Transportation Development Act (TDA) was presented at the May meeting. There was general agreement among the rural counties that TDA has been working effectively to accomplish the goal of establishing transit in rural areas of the state. Generally, rural RTPAs and LTCs see their role as guardians of the TDA mandates, and thus wish to be included in any policy-making effort to change the way TDA is administered.

#### **Efforts**

- An ad-hoc committee of Task Force members met with senior Caltrans management, and a panel explored the TDA at the fall Task Force conference.
- A TDA Oversight Committee has been reactivated by Caltrans, and a rural representative selected. Meeting will commence in 2004.

### **State Level Committee Participation**

In addition to those issues and efforts listed above, various Task Force members are also providing a rural perspective to the following efforts. Many of these efforts involve participation on committees established by Caltrans.

- TEA-21 Federal Reauthorization Steering Committee
- FTA 5310, Welfare to Work Advisory Committee, Rural Transit Issues
- Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS)

- Small Project Streamlining Committee
- Caltrans, City, County, Federal Highway Administration Coordinating Group
- Quality Assurance/Oversight Committee
- TDA Advisory Committee

Members of the Task Force also actively coordinate with other statewide groups to share information and perspective on transportation issues. These other groups include:

- Regional Transportation Planning Agency (RTPA) Group
- California Association of Councils of Government (CalCOG)
- Regional-Caltrans Coordinating Group
- Regional Council of Rural Counties (RCRC)
- California State Association of Counties (CSAC)
- California Association for Coordinated Transportation (CalACT)
- Statewide GIS Council